

CHAPTER 1

NEOCONSERVATISM IN THEORY

*The origins of the philosophy – Leo Strauss and his impact –
Allan Bloom and the Straussians – Neoconservatism absorbs
Straussianism – Irving Kristol*

For those who use the terms as insults, 'neoconservatism' and 'neocons' are merely synonyms for sinister extremism. For those who are equally aggrieved, hold the same attitude, but have tried delving deeper, the movement's intellectual lineage is alternately simplistic and confusing. In fact, neoconservatism's genesis and progress *are* both simple and confusing. Neoconservatism does not have a manifesto, and nor are there any but the broadest tenets on which all neocons could be said to agree. Even if they do agree on areas, there is no guarantee that this makes them neocons. And even if they are neocons, they may not think of themselves as such, or thank you for calling them so. Neoconservatism is a broad church, containing multiple tracks and directions of thought. And, since it is a type of thought and not a membership club or cult, establishing a lineage, never mind a definition, is not a task with obvious beginnings, middles or ends. Any attempt to pin the matter down, particularly in so short a book, will inevitably lead to some great names being passed over, and others being given idiosyncratic prominence. But in seeking to portray a way of seeing the world, the best one may hope to achieve is a kind of sensory introduction to, or acquaintance with, this most misunderstood 'ism'.

In the widely disseminated version of events, neoconservatism began in the post-war years, with the philosopher Leo Strauss indoctrinating his students at the University of Chicago. They were then sent out to indoctrinate a further generation of followers, and in this way Strauss's students were able – within a generation – to launch pre-emptive wars

against countries of their choosing. Although this calumny is untrue, it does bear some similarities to reality, and should certainly be considered, albeit in a more benign light. Neo-conservatism's origins can be traced, if not exclusively to Leo Strauss, then certainly to the period in which he was at his peak. And so Strauss is a useful and necessary point of entry for any investigation of neoconservatism.

But for all the focus he has received in the world press over recent years, anyone reading through Strauss to find reasons for the British and American-led attack on Iraq in 2003 is likely to be baffled and disappointed. Strauss's oeuvre is no invader's handbook.

THE STRAUSS FIXATION

The present prominent status accorded to Leo Strauss in the States had a suitably shady kick-off. Joshua Muravchik is among those to notice that 'the prize for the recent resuscitation of Strauss's name would seem to belong to the crackpot political agitator Lyndon LaRouche'.¹ Not entirely coincidentally, LaRouche (a perennial presidential candidate and former felon) leads the American field in anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Although he had been making speeches and writing on the matter for some months, it was in March 2003 that LaRouche wrote at greatest length about Strauss, describing him as a 'fascist', and cack-handedly talking of his "genetically" Nazi-like ideology.² *Children of Satan: The Ignoble Liars Behind Bush's No Exit War* was distributed across America throughout 2003 by the 'LaRouche 2004' campaign team. In his contribution to this joint work, one Jeffrey Steinberg added that 'this cabal of Strauss disciples, along with an equally small circle of allied neo-conservative and Likudnik fellow-travellers' had been waiting 30 years for 'the moment of opportunity to launch their not-so-silent coup'.³ All the soon to be popular, or populist, ingredients were there.

By 16 May, Steinberg was boasting in LaRouche's absurdly titled *Executive Intelligence Review* that the LaRouche attack had 'drawn blood':

Just weeks after the LaRouche in 2004 campaign began nationwide circulation of 400,000 copies of the Children of Satan dossier, exposing the role of University of Chicago fascist 'philosopher' Leo Strauss as the godfather of the neo-conservative war party in and around the Bush Administration, two major establishment publications have joined in the expose.

The two articles cited (rightly or wrongly) by the author were a piece by James Atlas in the *New York Times* of 4 May (accompanied by a crude caricature of Paul Wolfowitz) and a 12 May *New Yorker* piece by Seymour Hersh. Both articles contained all the hallmarks of conspiracy-theory reportage. Atlas (the author of a biography of Saul Bellow) wrote breathlessly that Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz 'has been identified as a disciple of Strauss', while Hersh revealed that Abram Shulsky, Director of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, was not only 'a scholarly expert in the works of the political philosopher Leo Strauss', but furthermore, 'like Wolfowitz, he was a student of Leo Strauss's, at the University of Chicago'. That any or all of this information could have been obtained from an alumnus list did not make the discoveries any less thrilling.

What was definitely less thrilling, and certainly more worrying, was that two of America's premier papers were publishing stories that bore traces suggesting they had been picked up from a document disseminated by LaRouche. It would be a worrying sign indeed if two of America's finest 'liberal' papers were finding common cause with a man like that. As Robert Bartley summed it up in the *Wall Street Journal*, 'Looking at the striking similarities in these accounts the conspiracy-minded might conclude that the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* have been reduced to recycling the insights of Lyndon LaRouche. But it's entirely possible that Mr. Atlas and Mr. Hersh have stumbled into the fever swamps all on their own.'⁴ Encouraged, stumbled or pushed, where the New York papers went the rest followed.

The game of hunt-the-Straussian ran across the entire

spectrum of print and news media. Everyone seemed to be asking, as *Foreign Policy In Focus* had it: 'Is U.S. foreign policy being run by followers of an obscure German Jewish political philosopher whose views were elitist, amoral, and hostile to democratic government?'⁵ For people who had seemingly never read a word of his writings, Leo Strauss posthumously provided an additional target for the ever cruder anger of those opposed to the direction of US foreign policy.⁶ With Strauss long dead, it was up to his pupils to absorb the wilder anger of the anti-neocon lobby. And for those intent on attacking, rather than debating, the neoconservative position, sinister motives would be attributed to almost anyone who had neared Chicago during Strauss's years as a professor there. No one was free from the taint; unless, of course, like the late Susan Sontag, you had been a pupil of Strauss, but somehow avoided being nudgingly vilified as 'a pupil of Strauss'.

Unable to identify quite what was going on, but convinced there was something afoot, the mainstream press in Britain, too, swiftly took up the name of Strauss as another byword for political nastiness. In January 2004 a *Daily Telegraph* column maligning Prime Minister Blair sneered that, 'Perhaps, like Paul Wolfowitz and other neo-conservatives, he [Blair] is a disciple of the political philosopher Leo Strauss', before going on to explain: 'Strauss was a champion of the "noble lie" – the idea that it is practically a duty to lie to the masses because only a small elite is intellectually fit to know the truth.'⁷ Misinformed Straussian summaries of this kind became commonplace across the media, finally culminating in the BBC's 2004 exercise in immoral equivalencing, *The Power of Nightmares*. This was the atmosphere surrounding the Iraq war – a time when conspiracies became commonplace and quacks became sources. But before any of them had arrived on the scene, there was already one writer who had attempted to dissect Strauss's teachings, and had done so with notable successes, or at least converts of her own.

In February 2002, the year before LaRouche's splenetically confused attack, the journalist Will Hutton briefly mentioned Strauss in his *Observer* column, as well as referring in passing

(in a new book) to his allegedly 'lethal legacy'.⁸ In the *Observer*, Hutton launched the wild claim that American conservatives were following Strauss's teachings by uniting 'patriotism, unilateralism, the celebration of inequality and the right of a moral élite to rule into a single unifying ideology'.⁹ By the end of the year, Hutton was describing Strauss as 'the high priest of ultra conservatism', and claiming that his American followers intended to use Republican success in the 2002 mid-term elections to penalise and punish the poor and outlaw abortion, a fantasist agenda presented by Hutton as 'the most fiercely reactionary programme to have emerged in any Western democracy since the war'.¹⁰

Anyone wondering what had inspired Hutton in these early populist British attempts to grapple with Strauss needed to look no further than the first, February, *Observer* article. Before revealing that 'Paul Wolfowitz...is a Straussian', Hutton had written, 'As Professor Shadia Drury describes in *Leo Strauss and the American Right*...' ¹¹ It was clear from what followed in that article, as well as his other *Observer* article, that Hutton's understanding of Strauss had certainly been influenced by, if not come wholesale from, Shadia Drury.

Drury is today the most consistently outspoken attacker of Leo Strauss. Currently professor of political theory at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, her 1998 book *Leo Strauss and the American Right* had become, post 9/11, a ready-made guide for Bush-administration critics intent on defaming neoconservatism's most prominent intellectual forebear. The vice-president of the Hudson Institute, Kenneth Weinstein, is just one of those who have identified Drury's book as the work 'paraphrased' by LaRouche for his own peculiar screed.¹² It is no coincidence that the book's misreadings and contradictions recur in nearly all of the less-informed attacks on Strauss.

In the wake of the *New York Times* piece in May 2003, the *Boston Globe* picked up and stretched the idea *du jour* with a 3,000 word article by Jeet Heer claiming that 'we live in a world increasingly shaped by Leo Strauss', and concluding that Strauss was a 'disguised Machiavelli, a cynical teacher

who encouraged his followers to believe that their intellectual superiority entitles them to rule over the bulk of humanity by means of duplicity'.¹³ The *International Herald Tribune* followed the Hersh *New Yorker* piece with an article by William Pfaff, in which he claimed that Strauss teaches that 'it has been necessary to tell lies to people about the nature of political reality'. He went on to explain that, 'An elite recognizes the truth, however, and keeps it to itself.'¹⁴ This is the line that the *Daily Telegraph* and every other hostile article on Strauss and neoconservatism ran with. In reality, of course, the claim is not just debatable, but wrong. And, as Muravchik was to point out, 'neither Heer nor Pfaff offers a clue as to where in Strauss's corpus one might find these ideas'. We are left, he correctly concludes, with the impression 'that they learned what they know of him from a polemical book by one Shadia Drury, who holds a chair in "social justice" at a Canadian university and who finds Strauss to be a "profoundly tribal and fascistic thinker".'¹⁵

Just as Hersh, Atlas and co. seem to have learned what they know of Strauss from Drury, so Drury – in a September 2003 article – subsequently used their articles as evidence to support her own contentions. This Drury self-referencing echo chamber allowed her to stretch her earlier conclusions to their inevitable non-scholarly ends. 'The trouble with the Straussians is that they are compulsive liars', she wrote in the September 2003 article, going on to compile an imaginative scare-list of the neoconservative 'agenda', and concluding, 'It is ironic that American neoconservatives have decided to conquer the world in the name of liberty and democracy, when they have so little regard for either.'¹⁶

With any due respect, it should be admitted that Drury's first book on Strauss (*The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, 1988) is a useful work, containing interesting and debatable points. Her later book, however – the one that has functioned as a crib sheet for writers from LaRouche to the mainstream newspapers – is a deeply flawed and partisan work, correctly identified by one writer who was a pupil of Strauss as 'a snide, careless and inaccurate piece of liberal boilerplate'.¹⁷ Whether or

not Drury has, as some have it, made it 'her life's work'¹⁸ to attack Strauss, she has certainly made a career out of it. Her central accusations are not new, but rather build on older allegations against Strauss, allegations often made by Strauss's contemporaries and rivals, and all of them intent on portraying Strauss as an implacable opponent of American democracy.

In some cases, the misunderstandings of Strauss's writings can be put down to ignorance; in other cases to opportunistic mendacity. But since both groups misrepresent Strauss, it is worth attempting to describe who Strauss was, what impact he had, and why some of that impact can still be felt.

LEO STRAUSS

Born in the Hessen region of Germany in 1899, Strauss was the son of a Jewish small businessman. He received his doctorate at the University of Hamburg in 1921, and went on to study with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger postdoctorally. Publishing in various journals throughout the twenties, his first book, on Spinoza's critique of religion (*Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*) was published in Berlin in 1931.

Strauss married in France in 1932 and moved to England in 1934, where the following year he took a post at Cambridge University. In 1937 he moved first to Columbia University, and then to New York. Having left Nazi Germany behind for good, Strauss became a US citizen in 1944. In 1949 he became professor of political philosophy at the University of Chicago, a post he held for nearly twenty years. It was around this period that his great works were written: *On Tyranny* (1948), *Natural Right and History* (1953), *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *The City and Man* (1964) and *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968). From 1968 until his death in 1973, he taught in California and Maryland, and completed *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (1975).

From this cursory overview of Strauss's career there are perhaps only two things that would stand out to anybody. First, Strauss was an émigré to the United States from Nazi Germany; second, his area of expertise was classical political

philosophy. When taken together, these two facts carry some of the most basic explanations for Strauss's current position of political controversy. The first led, and leads still, to Strauss being considered an outsider. The second either baffles people or sparks instinctive hostility: in the present reductive age, expertise on the classics is characterised as obscurantist or anti-democratic, while either expertise on, or the merest interest in, Machiavelli is definite evidence of something sinister.

In fact, little of Strauss's impact can be understood from the bare essentials of his life. To begin to understand why he is credited with the influence he has, one must glean from his followers – to those who credit him with their intellectual awakening – something of his essence.

STRAUSSIANISM

In a 2003 interview, Paul Wolfowitz poured scorn on the rumour that US foreign policy was somehow being dictated by the dead Leo Strauss. 'It's a product of fevered minds', he said, 'who seem incapable of understanding that September 11th changed a lot of things and changed the way we need to approach the world. Since they refused to confront that, they looked for some kind of conspiracy theory to explain it.' Wolfowitz's main point is absolutely right, but it was worth highlighting – as he went on to do – why the *New York Times* caricature of him as Leo Strauss's warrior on earth was flawed. 'I mean I took two terrific courses from Leo Strauss as a graduate student', he explained. 'One was on Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, which did help me understand our Constitution better. And one was on Plato's *Laws*. The idea that this has anything to do with U.S. foreign policy is just laughable.'¹⁹

Wolfowitz puts his finger on one of the central confusions of neoconservatism. Many people who are neoconservatives today never encountered Leo Strauss. Among second and third-generation neoconservatives, it has correctly been said that 'few read him today'.²⁰ But Strauss certainly had a great impact on certain thinkers who encountered him, in print and in person during his lifetime, influencing them in differing, broad and complex ways.

One of Strauss's most ardent pupils, and one who freely calls himself a 'Straussian', is Werner J. Dannhauser. Dannhauser was at Chicago at the same time as perhaps the purest Straussian of them all, Allan Bloom. In 2003 Dannhauser wrote that 'it is important to remember, though easy to forget, that he [Strauss] was not the sinister godfather of the Right, nor the pied piper of so-called conservative values'.²¹ His influence on Dannhauser, Bloom and many others was quite different, and the star-struck feeling for him is still evident, even today. 'Leo Strauss was like a sun around which we thought ourselves privileged to orbit',²² Dannhauser recollected. 'He was the center of our intellectual and even our moral universe.'²³

The actual father of neoconservatism (as opposed to its suspected godfather) – Irving Kristol – recalls, on first encountering it, that 'Strauss's work produced the kind of intellectual shock that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He turned one's intellectual universe upside down.'²⁴ But what did that shock consist of? And how did it turn listeners' and readers' minds so completely? The answer begins with an anecdote related by a reluctant Straussian descendant, Anne Norton.

Strauss firmly believed that fifth-century Athenian philosophy was capable of assisting – practically – contemporary American democracy. Inevitably, this celebration of ancient thought was paralleled at times by just criticism and condemnation of 'The Moderns' and modernity. On occasion Strauss was felt by some to lay this criticism on rather too thick. 'But Mr. Strauss', a student asked on one such occasion, 'Aren't *we* Moderns?' 'Yes', Strauss replied, 'but we are not *merely* Moderns.'²⁵

Strauss's way of looking at the world, and his way of approaching great texts, had a starting point at the opposite end from the modern scholarly norm. His devotion to the text being absolute, his first intention was to attempt to think of it not as a twentieth-century man, but as the thinker himself thought of it, and, furthermore, to understand the thinker as the thinker understood himself. Far from what Strauss's critics claim – that he somehow attempted to limit or reign in his

students' thinking, to make them surrender their intellect – from this simple initial process Strauss (as more than one student has testified) sought to awaken the critical instincts of his pupils. 'We were not asked to abandon ourselves, but to fulfill ourselves by contact with texts written by minds greater than ours', wrote Dannhauser.²⁶

Strauss believed that study of the great ancient philosophical texts was now – and always had been – the principal path to spiritual liberation. But he recognised a problem. Something in the modern age was resistant to the intellectual claims and intellectual revelation of the past. Certain modern philosophical presumptions and deeply questionable assumptions had begun clouding contemporary philosophers' attempts to understand great thinkers of the past. Since we are, by extension and as a result, unwilling to understand the past in its proper manner, Strauss saw that we fast become unable to understand ourselves. Some Straussians have put it more forcefully. Thomas L. Pangle summarised Strauss's attitude by writing that it is as a consequence of its perverse manner of approaching the past that 'ours is also an age of spiritual disintegration and intellectual crisis or decay'.²⁷

But as I mentioned at the outset, anyone searching through even the more promisingly titled works of Strauss may initially be disappointed by what he finds there. The importance of Strauss's approach dawns on the reader only gradually. *On Tyranny* is an example. This – one of Strauss's most approachable works – consists of a superlative commentary on Xenophon's *Hiero* or *Tyrannicus*, a dialogue on the nature of tyrants. From the very outset Strauss maintains that in his (our) own time, 'when we were brought face to face with tyranny – with a kind of tyranny that surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past – our political science failed to recognise it'. This is one of the clearest allusions in all his published work to the early lessons observed by the philosopher in Weimar Germany. 'It is not surprising then', Strauss went on, 'that many of our contemporaries, disappointed or repelled by present-day analyses of present-day tyranny, were relieved when they rediscovered the

pages in which Plato and other classical thinkers seemed to have interpreted for us the horrors of the twentieth century.²⁸ Here is a scholarly breath of fresh air, even now, and one whose significance in the academy of Strauss's day cannot be exaggerated. Here is not the modern thinker condescending to interpret the past, but Plato and his contemporaries interpreting us.

'Suddenly, one realized that one had been looking at the history of Western political thought through the wrong end of the telescope', wrote Irving Kristol. 'Instead of our looking down at them from the high vantage point of our more "advanced" era, he [Strauss] trained his students to look at modernity through the eyes of the "ancients" and the pre-moderns, accepting the premise that they were wiser and more insightful than we are.'²⁹ Though perfect common sense to some, the notion that Plato (for instance) was in crucial senses wiser than us discomfits many academics and others for numerous reasons, and not just because it pricks their intellectual arrogance. Critics of the position could, exceedingly coarsely, be divided into two groups. For those of a theistic mindset, Strauss's approach can appear (albeit falsely) to subvert the significance of the position of revealed religion; while for those of an atheistic standpoint, more inclined towards non-theistic theories of historical 'progress', Strauss might appear to be negating the much-cherished but little-explained consensus on species betterment. Of the two positions, the latter camp of Strauss critics is by far the more virulent and, naturally, religiously obsessive. That the arrogance needs pricking, even if the approach were wrong, was demonstrated with perfect idiocy by Shadia Drury in 2003, when she asserted that 'The idea that Strauss was a great defender of liberal democracy is laughable.' This accusation was justified with comprehensive incomprehension when she went on to ask: 'How could an admirer of Plato and Nietzsche be a liberal democrat?'³⁰

But it is not simply Strauss's approach to ancient texts that made his work controversial. On delving into his major works, what becomes clear is that this opening approach is not a scholar's one-off trick. What perplexes many when they first

attempt Strauss is that the entire approach seems to continue in a similar vein. Throughout his writing, none of the land on which we 'Moderns' believe we safely stand holds fast. Countless presumptions of the modern age are held up to scrutiny and found wanting, or cast aside as unneeded and unhelpful devices. What is more significant is that Strauss clearly believes that, by losing these fundamental presumptions of our situation, we have lost our connection with something far more important – our own souls.

Though this becomes clear from even his simplest texts and commentaries, Strauss never states such a contention explicitly in the manner of a polemicist. It comes across thoroughly, but, to begin with – to the first-time reader – somewhat obliquely. It is in this way, as Pangle observed, that 'the initially historical or even pedantic appearance of Strauss's writing reveals itself on closer inspection to be the sign of Strauss's painfully incisive critical stance towards almost every major feature of the contemporary intellectual and political landscape'.³¹ The small signs, the apparent scholarly idiosyncrasies, reveal beneath their surface a vast and profound feeling of questioning unease about the way in which western society is conducting itself, the direction in which it might be drifting, and the forcelessness with which it is defending itself. A philosopher himself, it was in philosophy that Strauss made his stand.

Natural Right and History is a monumental book, perfectly fitting Dannhauser's description of Strauss's work as 'specializ[ing] in unsettling settled convictions, and usually [doing] so in quiet prose buttressed by formidable scholarship'.³² Assessing the treatment of natural right from the pre-Socratics to the twentieth century, Strauss sets out to demonstrate that there is a natural and true distinction in ethics and politics between right and wrong. Starting with Heraclitus' statement that it is 'men [who] have made the supposition that some things are just and others are unjust',³³ Strauss traces the trend of refutation of natural right, and painstakingly constructs the case for the defence. Not only is the work a profound work of scholarship, it is also Strauss's most comprehensive stand

against nihilism, an intention that Strauss outlines in his 'Introduction'.

Nihilism was and is the distinctive enemy of Strauss and his followers. Indeed, in a piece on Allan Bloom in 2000, Christopher Hitchens mentioned – before the current Strauss-fixation began – that 'the term "nihilist" is one of the give-away words by which one can recognise a member or supporter of the school of Leo Strauss' (it might be noted that in the wake of 9/11, Hitchens was to begin using the term more, as it were, liberally, himself).³⁴ The identification and use of the term is in no way mere rhetoric, however. Strauss and Straussians recognise how incomparably deep the problem of nihilism has gone in society, and to begin countering it Strauss set out to identify its causes.

For Strauss, in *Natural Right and History*, the cause is clear: 'The contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism – nay, it is identical with nihilism.'³⁵ In this, and similar passages, Strauss clearly and repeatedly stands with the American fathers, and against the historical trend that he had seen develop once before, towards relativism. It is relativism that is identified by Strauss as the opening that leads to nihilism. Relativism rejects the notion that any principle can be entirely and rationally justified, leaving itself ultimately mute before the excesses of which man is capable: it is the disintegrating component in democracy. 'This is not to say', one contemporary Straussian has written, 'that all social scientists who deny natural right are consciously nihilists, but only [*sic*] that their rejection of natural right logically leads to nihilism.'³⁶

Though his successors were to take this stance to attack specific aspects of their culture and society, for Strauss the problem was firstly a problem of erosion within the academy. Equally importantly, the problem was a problem for philosophy itself, and it was in this framework that Strauss set out his argument.

At the very start of his book the philosopher gives examples of 'just' and 'unjust' laws, and argues forcefully that both are undermined by a rejection of natural right:

...the need for natural right is as evident today as it has been for centuries and even millennia. To reject natural right is tantamount to saying that all right is positive right, and this means that what is right is determined exclusively by the legislators and the courts of the various countries.

But by using the necessary notions of 'just' and 'unjust' laws, Strauss goes on, we imply

that there is a standard of right and wrong independent of positive right and higher than positive right: a standard with reference to which we are able to judge of positive right. Many people today hold the view that the standard in question is in the best case nothing but the ideal adopted by our society or our 'civilization' and embodied in its way of life or its institutions. But according to the same view, all societies have their ideals, cannibal societies no less than civilized ones.

And here we come to the crux of Strauss's argument:

If principles are sufficiently justified by the fact that they are accepted by a society, the principles of cannibalism are as defensible or sound as those of civilized life. From this point of view, the former principles can certainly not be rejected as simply bad. And, since the ideal of our society is admittedly changing, nothing except dull and stale habit could prevent us from placidly accepting a change in the direction of cannibalism.³⁷

There are two further central points set out early in Strauss's great work that are worth mentioning now, because they are going to recur later. The first is the notion that society had the opportunity to choose the side of natural right, and made the wrong decision. Strauss noted that:

...there is a tension between the respect for diversity or individuality and the recognition of natural right. When liberals became impatient of the absolute limits to diversity or individuality that are imposed even by the most liberal version of natural right, they had to make a choice between natural right and the uninhibited cultivation of individuality. They chose the latter. Once this step was taken, tolerance appeared as one value or ideal among many, and not intrinsically superior to its opposite. In other words, intolerance appeared as a value equal in dignity to tolerance.³⁸

For followers of Strauss, both conscious and unconscious of the fact, Strauss had, in this passage and this book, set out the ground on which the people eventually to be defined as neoconservatives were to fight the culture wars. He had illuminated the point that would be popularised by his disciple (for once the term is apt) Allan Bloom, and that would be repeated and extended by others.

Strauss was, *pace* his critics, a passionate believer in liberal education. He saw the situation in what were, for his age, starkly ideological terms. With the ever-present threat of democracy's decline from mass rule to mass culture, Strauss was, like Alexis de Tocqueville before him, alert to the apparently soft 'tyranny of the majority'. He was also aware, and believed, that a practical and achievable antidote was at hand, both for democracy and for the avoidance of tyrannical conformity: for him it was a simple truth that 'liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture'.³⁹ In terms that Bloom would later extend, Strauss wrote: 'liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant'.⁴⁰ Strauss did not believe that liberal education would make all men happy, nor that it would make all men good, but he believed that, if we keep alert to the dangers, and are cognisant of our failings, liberal education enhances, even enables, liberal democracy.

For Strauss was – again *pace* his critics – a great defender of liberal democracy. But his praise came with a caveat. In a

phrase that stands greatly to his credit, he wrote in 1968 that, 'We are not permitted to be flatterers of democracy precisely because we are friends and allies of liberal democracy.'⁴¹ What Strauss knew was that the true friend of democracy and the people is not the fawner and panderer to the people, but the individual who criticises the people when they deserve to be criticised. This may not allow the true democrat to be regarded with fondness during his own lifetime, 'though he may', as Pangle puts it, 'win a kind of posthumous respect that is worth much more than popularity'.⁴²

What Strauss identified, and what he has hardly been thanked for identifying, is that liberal democracy carries within it certain seeds of its own destruction, and that foremost among the seeds are those of relativism. If Strauss's successors stated the case more plainly and antagonistically than he did himself, then it was because they were writing in a period in which relativism had secured a greater hold not just in the academy, but on western democracy as a whole. For Strauss, the immediate concern in his writings was for philosophy. He saw that the modern crisis of natural right could become a crisis of philosophy because of the politicisation of philosophy. This complaint may, posthumously, seem strong coming from Strauss, but what Strauss was attempting to do was to make philosophy secure from politicisation, a process that he considered had been destructive for philosophy ever since it first took hold during the seventeenth century. Since that time, in Strauss's eyes, philosophy had lost its position as 'a pure source of humane inspiration and aspiration', and become, instead, 'a weapon, and hence an instrument'.⁴³ In part, Strauss's life's work was an attempt to put that right.

When we look at his legacy today, even accepting that he does not have the impact now that he had when he was alive (and that, alive or dead, he never had the destructive power with which his detractors credit him), it is impossible to deny that Strauss's career left traces. Those traces carried on in thinkers, writers, politicians and philosophers. They carried on in those who learned from Strauss and in those who 'only' read him. But they also carry on in those who have benefited

from neither his books nor his teaching, but who intuit, by the indefinable trickle-down process of ideas, that there were people in the past who thought as they do.

Of the generation of those who directly carried on his legacy I will focus on two men. In different spheres, and in different ways, they founded a distinctive new ideology, carrying aspects of Strauss and chunks of much else out into the world. They did this both inside and outside the academy in a way that Strauss himself had never done, and had arguably never intended to do.

In the realm of politics, the seeds of Strauss's thought were best expanded upon by Irving Kristol. In the realm of the academy, the man who stands out is Allan Bloom, a man who continued and extended Strauss's legacy, and who sprang from Chicago passionately advocating the words of Strauss to his class on the occasion of Winston Churchill's death:

We have no higher duty, and no more pressing duty, than to remind ourselves and our students, of political greatness, human greatness, of the peaks of human excellence.⁴⁴

ALLAN BLOOM

If Strauss had largely kept his criticism within philosophy, Bloom was the person who would take it out into the world. Having studied under him at Chicago, Bloom (who was born in 1930) became Strauss's most celebrated intellectual successor. He can even be glimpsed, acolyte-like, flitting in and out of the philosopher's correspondence with Alexandre Kojeve,⁴⁵ and once stated that the first occasion he encountered Strauss was the 'decisive moment' of his life.⁴⁶ After Chicago, and further study and teaching in Paris and Heidelberg, Bloom returned to the States to teach over the following decades at (among other places) Chicago, Yale and Cornell. His translation of Plato's *Republic* came out in 1968, and his translation of Rousseau's *Emile* a decade later. A much published and revered academic on the campuses on which he taught, Bloom's name may never have become more widely known had it not been for his friendship with Saul Bellow. In the early

1980s, Bellow (who was also to become Bloom's biographer in fictional form after Bloom's premature death in 1992⁴⁷) encouraged his friend to collect his wide-ranging thoughts on culture, philosophy and society into a book, written as much as possible in the manner in which he talked.⁴⁸ Working under the title 'American Nihilism', Bellow's encouragement eventually paid off in the monumental *The Closing of the American Mind*.

If it may now be hard to understand why certain Straussian texts initially had the impact they did, no such confusion could exist over the effects of Bloom's masterpiece. A surprise best-seller when it was published (with an introduction by Saul Bellow) in 1987, *The Closing of the American Mind* is certainly the most widely bought and – they are not always the same thing – probably the most widely read Straussian argument in print.

The book caused a shockwave when it appeared, and Bloom was instantly both vilified and lauded. Its central thesis, that the American mind had become closed by becoming so indiscriminate was, it has been observed, 'almost unhinged' by its success, 'because the unregarded morbidity of the American soul turned out to be something that millions of Americans wanted to read about'.⁴⁹ The book was popular not only because it provided a totem of resistance for reactionaries, but because it consisted of the lengthiest, most intellectually solid, and wittily erudite analysis of American education and culture of the decade. It was practical in its appeals and provided crystalline explanations for things that many Americans had been thinking and feeling for a long time.

His friend Bellow began the diagnosis in his superb foreword. Discussing the situation of the artist in contemporary America, he writes: 'to put the matter at its baldest, we live in a thought-world, and the thinking has gone very bad indeed'.⁵⁰ Bloom's ambition in helping to repair this is also stated at the outset. 'This essay', as he puts it, is 'a meditation on the state of our souls'.⁵¹ His own 'Introduction' shows that this is not just a meditation, but a fight for those souls – in particular for the souls of the young.

'There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.'⁵² Thus the first sentence. The rest of the book is Strauss out of the lecture hall and in the public arena. 'They [the students] are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality. And the two are related in a moral intention...The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance.'⁵³ This attribute may seem all very well, or even display a high level of culture and sympathy, but this is not so, says Bloom – worse lies beneath. 'The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated. The best they can do is point out all the opinions and cultures there are and have been. What right, they ask, do I or anyone else have to say one is better than the others?'⁵⁴ The American mind has not just become open: it has become so open it has become closed. Furthermore, it has become so 'open' that it cannot even defend itself from this position in which there is no enemy 'other than the man who is not open to everything'.⁵⁵

Bloom's theory is set out clearly and fervently: 'Cultural relativism destroys both one's own and the good.'⁵⁶ 'Historicism and cultural relativism actually are a means to avoid testing our own prejudices and asking, for example, whether men are really equal or whether that opinion is merely a democratic prejudice.'⁵⁷

It was always known that there were many and conflicting opinions about the good, and nations embodying each of them. Herodotus was at least as aware as we are of the rich diversity of cultures. But he took that observation to be an invitation to investigate all of them to see what was good and bad about each and find out what he could learn about good and bad from them. Modern relativists take that same observation as proof that such investigation is impossible and that we must be respectful of them all.⁵⁸

Twentieth-century man has set himself up – as though by nature – as greater than Herodotus.

Where Strauss ventured first, Bloom follows, making – and this is key – suggestions for where we could go right. In discussing relativism's assassination of free thought and its inability to discern the good from the bad, Bloom argues (not simply as some have interpreted it, for a 'great books' approach to education) that at the root of *any* meaningful system of learning there must be solidity. He says of his generation that:

When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but clichés, superficialities, the material of satire. I am not saying anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by. I mean rather that a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished.⁵⁹

If the men in Plato's cave⁶⁰ are able to discern and ascend thanks to the light, these 'modern' men are starting off (and remaining) self-inflictedly blind and incapable of movement. Not only, says Bloom, do the young not have any image of the perfect soul – as they do, say, of the perfect body – 'they do not even imagine that there is such a thing'.⁶¹

And he does not simply say that this emptiness at the centre of the young is tragic. It is also, he recognises, dangerous. In a land which pretends so completely that everything is open, but in which – as the briefest of glances could show – so much is ignored (a comedy without an *Inferno*⁶²), the society and the people who set out to be free in it will become slaves (have perhaps already become so). Tyranny of some kind is looming when, as Saul Bellow put it, 'public virtue is a kind of

ghost town into which anyone can move and declare himself sheriff'.⁶³

And what is the tyranny? There are several answers.

One is the tyranny of popular culture, of mass culture, which Bloom believes the people do not in any sense 'believe' in. He asks whether, when people talk of 'preserving' their culture they really imagine this 'artificial notion' can take the place of God or country 'for which they once would have been willing to die'.⁶⁴ Drug-taking has produced people whose 'energy has been sapped', for whom 'the pleasure they experienced in the beginning was so intense that they no longer look for it at the end, or as the end'.⁶⁵ In passages of what one critic has described as 'extreme dyspepsia',⁶⁶ Bloom consistently attacks the low conformity of rock music – dissected by Bloom with the final analysis that 'never was there an art form directed so exclusively to children'.⁶⁷ In these circumstances the vital objective is not – as this generation has it – 'speaking one's own mind', but rather, 'finding a way to have one's own mind'.⁶⁸ It is no surprise that the second part of Bloom's book, entitled 'Nihilism, American Style', details the crass popular absorption of Continental despair into American culture, with its demeaning end hybrid of 'nihilism with a happy ending'.⁶⁹

With this form of nihilism rampant, the other main tyranny that Bloom identifies and warns against is the tyranny of 'liberalism', or pseudo-liberalism.

Bloom taught at Cornell during the campus upheavals and riots of 1968 and, as one commentator put it, 'never recovered from the moment when black students produced guns to amplify their demands'.⁷⁰ Shocking as some of the violence on campuses was, it was not this that shocked Bloom and fuelled his 1987 book. Rather it was the (not just unwillingness, but) *inability* of his colleagues to defend themselves and liberal education from violence and intimidation that spurred Bloom to make his stand.

Firstly, Bloom saw this fatal weakness as a challenge to the universities. Secondly, it was a challenge for America. Of the universities he wrote that 'One cannot say that we must defend academic freedom when there are grave doubts about

the principles underlying academic freedom...In order to find out why we have fallen on such hard times, we must recognize that the foundations of the university have become extremely doubtful to the highest intelligences. Our petty tribulations have great causes.⁷¹

For America, the battle to be fought and re-won was cultural. The cultural battle had been lost in the sixties – and not, Bloom notes in supremely caustic mode, by people with any especial bravery. These victors did not come to prominence entirely without message or aim, but with ill-thought aims that were tyrannical in their insistence on conformity, so ‘open’ that their thought ‘pays no attention to natural rights or the historical origins of our regime’⁷² (indeed despises them), and so blind that they are led into the worst mass culture of them all – a mass culture into which nihilism has been entirely absorbed as an attitude.

In addition, listing the non-‘sacrifices’ made by the students in the name of their new-found creed, Bloom makes a pertinent observation on the sheer ‘coincidence’ of it all: ‘Never in history had there been such a marvelous correspondence between the good and the pleasant.’⁷³ The easy giving-up of cherished principles, the genuflection of elite institutions to barbarism and infantilism, and the resounding sense that a group had been given a victory from a war which, though petulantly fought, had gone un-resisted, informed Bloom’s bitterest attack. The ground had been given to people who, having won it, had no idea what they were going to do with it, and who, now in position, were free to wreak their damage.

That damage, Bloom saw, was firstly to the soul. Secondly it was to the institutions which provided the best chances to properly form the soul, but which had been so degraded that they ensured the young have ‘a long climb just to get back up to the cave’,⁷⁴ never mind ascending from there. Thirdly, the damage was to America. At the close of his book, Bloom wrote:

This is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged. Just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world

has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities, and the two are related as they have never been before. The gravity of our given task is great, and it is very much in doubt how the future will judge our stewardship.⁷⁵

In the 'Preface' to his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel famously wrote that the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk – that philosophy only takes wing when the light is failing. Bloom recalled Hegel's claim midway through *The Closing of the American Mind*.⁷⁶ By the book's end it is clear that the 'closing' refers not just to the closing of the American mind and of the American soul, but to the possibility of the closing of America *tout court*, and with it the last best chance, as Strauss too had seen it, for democracy and liberty.

After Allan Bloom died, in 1992, his friend Werner Dannhauser wrote, 'The legacy of Strauss lives on, and nobody did more to secure it than Allan Bloom.'⁷⁷ In his progress from devoted disciple to rightful heir, Bloom's work brought Straussian preoccupations into the mainstream. As many people reading *The Closing of the American Mind* discovered, those preoccupations turned out to be far from just the concerns of academic philosophers. They were the concerns of a large number of those in America and the West who felt that their values were under threat; that they were threatened from within; that the path they were on was not the right one, but that the fight to regain the right path had begun.

Irving Kristol once wrote that 'It is the self-imposed assignment of neoconservatism to explain to the American people why they are right, and to the intellectuals why they are wrong.'⁷⁸ With Kristol – the next Straussian on the horizon – this concern became overtly political. Becoming political involved many things Strauss would never have intended, and many things with which he would have disagreed. But Strauss himself was no longer the centre. As the political movement began, it was Straussianism that became absorbed into neo-conservatism.

IRVING KRISTOL

Irving Kristol is commonly referred to as the father, grandfather or godfather of neoconservatism. Born in 1920, and thus, with the likes of Norman Podhoretz, among the first generation of those to be identified as a 'neoconservative', no individual has done more to define, explain and argue the neoconservative point of view. Married to social commentator and historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, and father of William Kristol (editor of *The Weekly Standard* and chairman of The Project for the New American Century), Kristol is also, like Podhoretz, head of a neoconservative family as well as movement. Having edited, among other publications, *Commentary* and (with Stephen Spender) *Encounter*, and having co-founded *The National Interest* and *The Public Interest*, Kristol has been central in encouraging other neoconservative thinkers, as well as in leading the way in his own articles and books. He is best defined, as one admirer has put it, as simply 'the central figure in neoconservatism'.⁷⁹

Having started his life as a Trotskyite, Kristol found the two great formative influences of his mature years to be, in the 1940s, the literary and social critic Lionel Trilling, and in the 1950s, Leo Strauss (acquaintance with whose thought provided Kristol with the intellectual revelation quoted earlier). Trilling was a sceptical liberal, whose gifts to future neoconservatism included the phrase 'adversary culture', identifying the paradox at the heart of contemporary American cultural life. From very different schools and disciplines, and with widely differing aims, what Trilling and Strauss had in common, as Kristol noted half a century later, was that 'their skepticism went to the very roots of modern liberalism and modern conservatism, respectively'.⁸⁰ Apart from the influence of their ideas, one result of Kristol's discovery of these two thinkers was that from the very outset of his career he understood that almost all the presumptions of modern American society were open to question. Kristol was to spend his career ensuring that they were not merely questioned, but interrogated, forcefully and repeatedly, in order to expose cant, false ideology and lies. The first big target Kristol aimed at was communism.

From the beginnings of his career as a writer and journalist in the late 1940s, Kristol had become a forceful and lucid anti-communist. At this point anti-communism was itself a defining political stand, and one that could by no means be taken for granted. But even by the sixties, anti-communism was retrospectively seen by many in the West as some kind of an 'elaborate con game on behalf of the power structure'.⁸¹ Later generations – often urged on by no more than an acquaintance with Arthur Miller's most famous work – have been prone to regard McCarthyism as something as medieval and fruitless as the witch trials. But the truth is that the problem existed, was growing, had nuclear weaponry, and possessed a great many supporters in the heart of America. For those like Kristol, living through the period and seeking to retain traditional liberal Americanism while utterly opposing communism, Senator McCarthy was still an unappealing figure, described by Kristol in one essay as a 'vulgar demagogue'. However, as Kristol wrote in the same essay, "Civil Liberties," 1952 – A Study in Confusion: 'there is one thing that the American people know about Senator McCarthy: he, like them, is unequivocally anti-Communist. About the spokesmen for American liberalism, they feel they know no such thing. And with some justification.'⁸²

Kristol led the way in smoking out those whose real sympathies were far from American and far from liberal. 'It is a fact that Communism today rules one-third of the human race, and may soon rule more', he wrote in 1954. 'It is the most powerful existing institution which opposes such changes and reforms as liberalism proposes. Why, then, should not liberals, and liberals especially, fear and hate it?'⁸³

But with time it was not just its inconsistencies, but the fundamental assumptions of liberalism that became questionable to Kristol. As the 'culture wars' of the 1960s began, Kristol noticed that the liberal ethos was fast moving towards the political extremities. 'My liberal credentials became tattered, in my own eyes as well as in the eyes of others', he wrote.⁸⁴ The blame for this lay principally with the counter-culture that emerged after 1965, engulfing the universities, and overwhelming popular culture. It was during this period,

wrote Kristol, that 'we discovered that traditional "bourgeois" values were what we had believed in all along, had indeed simply taken for granted'.⁸⁵

What Bloom had witnessed on the campus, Kristol, Podhoretz and others noticed in society at large – that the values and presumptions which had successfully underpinned society in America from its beginnings were being openly and popularly attacked; and furthermore, this assault was taking place at all levels of society. Even though they had initially regarded themselves as liberals, living through a period of terrible societal change (and, for instance, recognising innate flaws in the Great Society initiatives of Lyndon B. Johnson) Kristol and his fellow thinkers came to believe not just that liberalism was not up to the job – that there were unbridgeable flaws in the liberal programme – but that the whole liberal world-view was faulty. It wasn't that liberalism didn't feel nice, or didn't look nice; the problem was that it was wrong.

By its consistent refusal to adequately condemn Nazism's single moral equivalent in Russia, liberalism had shown that it possessed none of the attributes its name suggested. By undermining the society that was defending true liberal values from the threat of communist tyranny, it had shown its flaws and its deceptions.

It was in this climate that neoconservatism was born. The first appearances of the word itself are debatable, though it is commonly thought to have been used first by Michael Harrington and *Dissent* magazine. Though it was initially intended as a term of insult, Kristol was one of the few among his contemporaries to happily embrace the new and still indistinct moniker, content simply to be free of the 'liberal' label if liberals themselves were going to retain their presumptuous use of the term. Many others who were identified as neoconservatives held out against the term, unwilling to have it thrust upon them, but Kristol accepted it readily 'perhaps because', he joked, 'having been named Irving, I am relatively indifferent to baptismal caprice'.⁸⁶ Becoming a neoconservative did not require any great leap in itself – to become a neoconservative in the 1960s, Kristol later remarked, 'all you had to do was

stand in place'.⁸⁷ It was the ground itself that was slipping: neoconservatives were not going to totter with it. In defiance of both conservatism and liberalism, Kristol best defined his movement at an unattributable moment: 'A neoconservative', he said, 'is a liberal who has been mugged by reality.'

Kristol found that embracing the new identity provided 'an experience of moral, intellectual, and spiritual liberation'.⁸⁸ He said later, 'It usually makes no sense...to argue over nomenclature. If you can, you take what people call you and run with it.'⁸⁹ Abandoning the increasingly narrowing position of 'anti-communist liberal' in favour of 'neoconservative' allowed Kristol to confess to something he had long suspected:

I no longer had to pretend to believe – what in my heart I could no longer believe – that liberals were wrong because they subscribe to this or that erroneous opinion on this or that topic. No – liberals were wrong, liberals are wrong, because they are liberals. What is wrong with liberalism is liberalism – a metaphysics and a mythology that is woefully blind to human and political reality.⁹⁰

That blindness was increasingly demonstrating itself in American society. Kristol recognised that what he termed 'the rot and decadence' within American society was not just a consequence of the liberal agenda, but the actual aim of it. This 'liberalism' was simultaneously aiming for 'political and social collectivism on the one hand, and moral anarchy on the other'.⁹¹ In order to stand against this threat, Kristol and other first-generation neoconservatives had not just to call for reversals in the progress of the agenda of socialism, anarchy and nihilism; they had to explain how and why an end should be made of it. Liberalism had failed, and to replace it neoconservatives had to adopt a better stance; one that was not only practical, humane and truly liberal, but that expressed the politics of reality, not the perpetually dangerous politics of fantasy – it required, as Philip Selznick put it, 'moral realism'.⁹²

Assisting him in that objective was Kristol's study of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, which pointed him – as he put

it – ‘beyond liberalism’,⁹³ helping him to read, among other things, the Book of Genesis with new insight. Michael Novak wrote of the effect of Niebuhr on neoconservative thought in a 1972 *Commentary* piece, and Mark Gerson rightly cites the significance of one particular line of Niebuhr’s (from *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*): ‘It is man’s capacity for justice that makes democracy possible, but it is his tendency to injustice that makes it necessary.’⁹⁴ From time spent on the liberal side and as anti-communists, neoconservatives were convinced that, flawed though it may be in places, liberal democracy provided the best possible means by which man’s natural tendency towards evil could be contained. As they read through the past for its insights on their own time, and contemplated the present, neoconservatives found it increasingly remarkable that liberals were able to sustain the attitudes they did on the fundamentals of human nature.

To get right down to it (as Leon R. Kass says and does at the very opening of his commentary on the Cain and Abel episode in Genesis – an essay in honour of Kristol), when it comes to tracing the source of human troubles and misery, liberals are inclined to blame external causes – for example, poverty, societal prejudice, misfortunes in upbringing, and so on – while conservatives are inclined to blame ‘causes lurking naturally within the souls of men’, such as greed, pride, vanity and so forth.⁹⁵ Kristol realised that the drift since the 1950s, and certainly during the 1960s, had been towards an unalloyed vision of human perfectibility – a vision that was socialist inspired, even when the end aim was not knowingly socialism. He realised the terrible dangers of this drift of vision. Drawing on a wealth of philosophical ancestry, not least Strauss, Kristol came to the conclusion that, although we can improve our condition, governments cannot make it immeasurably better, or unrecognisably better. Though our conditions may be improved, the basic, flawed mould cannot be altered. Though many of neoconservatism’s critics have complained that such analyses make neoconservatives pessimists or worse, the result, both in Kristol’s thought and in the thoughts of those who have come after him, is, on the contrary, optimistic and

encouraging. It recognises the limits of our ambition, and aims for the achievement of that which can be achieved – not in the best of all possible worlds, or in a different world, but in this world, now.

Of all the consensus attitudes that stood at the opposite end from this achievable and encouraging aim of Kristol and co., none was more glaring than the increasing cult of unending 'welfarism': a thing whose grand end aims were often so impossible, its attempted explanations so tortuous, that the whole edifice was in need of a drastic overhaul. Having studied – through his wife's writings – the successes of charity in areas of Victorian society, Kristol accepted none of the common modern perceptions.

Compassion organized into a political movement is a very dangerous thing and, I think, a wicked thing. If you want to be compassionate, go out and be compassionate to people. If you want to give money, give people money. If you want to work with poor people, go out and work with poor people. I have great respect for people who do that. But when people start becoming bureaucrats of compassion and start making careers out of compassion – whether political, journalistic or public entertainment careers – then I must say I suspect their good faith.⁹⁶

Welfarism was not, as it stood, the answer – it was a problem, and it had become a problem because a piece of false or bad logic had been taken for granted, and then acted upon. The same thing was happening elsewhere.

At the root of many of these assumptions, on race, welfare, employment and other issues, lay the most mistaken rallying cry of liberals, 'equality':

I know the question of equality is something that many religious people are quite obsessed with. Here, I will simply plead my Jewishness and say, equality has never been a Jewish thing. Rich men are fine, poor men are fine, so long as they are decent human beings. I do not like

equality. I do not like it in sports, in the arts, or in economics. I just don't like it in this world.⁹⁷

Kristol pioneered robust attacks on every aspect of liberalism, but this did not mean that his position – or that of neo-conservatives as a whole – was traditionally 'conservative'. From their very beginning neoconservatives were different from traditional American conservatives. And it wasn't always merely a matter of outlook. For a start, most of the first neo-conservatives were from lower-middle or working-class backgrounds. Veterans of the Second World War, they had also seen the process from triumph against one totalitarian regime to hostile peace with the other, and they were disillusioned with conservatism's weak response.

What was needed was not, as a conservative might have it, the turning back of the clock: neoconservatives did not want to see society return to the 1930s, 1920s or even a Victorian hey-day. Neoconservatives saw that society had made, not least economically, significant progress. But socially, economically and philosophically they represented something very different from conservatism – they represented revolutionary conservatism. Richard Perle said in a 2004 interview, 'We're closer to being revolutionaries than conservatives',⁹⁸ and the title 'revolutionary conservatives' certainly fits the movement well, when from its very outset, the differences were plain in policy and outlook.

The work of Kristol's that permanently separated him from traditional conservatism, and that supplied neoconservatism with a distinct stand on economics (an area into which neocons had not previously strayed), was the result of a sabbatical year from teaching at New York University during 1976–77. By this point a supporter of the Republican party, Kristol recognised that Republicans would have to be able to do more than book-balance if they were ever again to become a dynamic political force and return to power. Following the period in the seventies of simultaneous inflation and depression that had destroyed his faith in Keynesian economics, Kristol decided 'with the greatest reluctance that "neoconser-

vatism" could not blandly leave the economy to the economists'. He decided he had to become 'economically literate' himself.⁹⁹

Taking his lead from E. M. Forster (on whom Lionel Trilling had been an authority) and his *Two Cheers for Democracy*, Kristol wrote his 1978 book *Two Cheers for Capitalism*. In it Kristol performs the difficult task of securing the humane ground in the successful capitalist state. It is, as Michael Novak wrote in *Commentary*, 'a liberal critique of both corporate capitalism and socialism'.¹⁰⁰ In E. M. Forster's argument on democracy, two cheers were permissible because they allow for criticism – a third is undeserved. For Kristol a similar equation is at play. Market capitalism cannot be given unanimously good reviews because it neglects man's need for the moral authority that can only come with tradition. Economists cannot fulfil all the needs of men, they can only make economic sense of the world, 'and the world does not move by economic sense alone'.¹⁰¹ 'On the whole', Kristol confessed, 'being a humanist rather than an economist, I think this is a good thing.'¹⁰²

His second major complaint (argued against later by the neoconservative economist Irwin Stelzer in his essay 'A Third Cheer for Capitalism'¹⁰³) is that the capitalist free market, though allowing the people to have nearly limitless choice over what they can buy, brings with it profound non-economic questions. Only libertarians would argue that people should have anything they like. Kristol argues (in an essay in *Two Cheers* entitled 'Capitalism, Socialism and Nihilism') that there are repercussions for society beyond those conceived of by economists, and though they are 'quite obvious and easily comprehensible', they 'are terribly difficult to explain to economists'.¹⁰⁴ Since the economy only makes up a part of our lives, it must not be allowed to take over and entirely dictate to our society. In a spirit of mature acceptance of that which is largely good, Kristol argues that a third all-praising cheer for capitalism would destabilise this necessary balance. Capitalism should not be allowed to tread on, let alone dictate, ground on which it has no business. Warning capitalism to stay within its

respectable confines, it is in the end simply 'safer' to give it 'only two cheers'.¹⁰⁵

Aside from being a comment on the position in society of economics, Kristol's argument was also, of course, a sustained and lengthy explanation to those in government of the rightful limits of their power. Just as there were areas in which economists would cause damage if they ventured, so government should avoid the trap of thinking that ever increasing interference, indeed comprehensive interference, would either endear it to the people, or make the people happier.

In his writings over a fifty-year career, Irving Kristol set out, in thoughts on morality, politics and economics, the first comprehensive vision of a new approach to politics. Profoundly disenchanted with the liberal slide to decay, neo-conservatives were happy to join the fray on behalf of traditions for which conservatism *per se* seemed to have lost its voice. And that they were a new breed was made eminently clear by Kristol. Even the optimistic manner of neoconservatives differed from their conservative cohorts. 'The trouble with traditional American conservatism', Kristol once explained, 'is that it lacks a naturally cheerful, optimistic disposition. Not only does it lack one, it regards signs of one as evidence of unsoundness [and] irresponsibility'.¹⁰⁶ It is not 'tradition' that made American conservatism morose and unappealing, however, but 'nostalgia'. And as Kristol wrote in 1964, 'nostalgia is one of the legitimate, and certainly one of the most enduring of human emotions; but the politics of nostalgia is at best distracting, at worst pernicious'.¹⁰⁷

Despite having seen much of their culture degraded, and much of their conservative instinct on liberty trampled upon, neoconservatives refrained from gloomy nostalgia because they knew that they had two things on their side. Firstly, their arguments were broadly in tune with the American public, who had felt similarly adrift stuck between the nihilistic world of the counter-culture and unrestrained capitalism. Secondly, neoconservatives knew that their ideas had persuasiveness on their side, and that their attack on the status quo of socialist-inspired 'liberalism' in particular had only just begun. In the

battle to come, neoconservatives knew that everything was to play for, that they were on the right side of America, and the right side of history.